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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the contribution of school-based mother-tongue literacy to the maintenance and renewal of endangered languages, with Navajo as the case in point. Although Navajo claims the most speakers among U.S. indigenous languages, the absolute number and relative proportion of Navajo speakers have declined drastically in the last 30 years. Language usage varies across the Navajo Reservation, depending on individual community histories and contact with English. English dominates the print environment, although other forces reinforce the primacy of oral Navajo. Historically, the single most harmful factor for language maintenance was forced English-only schooling. Following a shift in federal policies, the Rough Rock Demonstration School in Arizona was founded in 1966 as the first tribally controlled school, one that reinforced Navajo language and culture in the classroom. After years of fluctuating funds and services, Rough Rock's bilingual program has been reinvigorated by a cadre of local bilingual educators. The K-6 two-way bilingual program develops children's oral and written Navajo and English proficiency and features high-quality exposure to spoken Navajo, teacher-developed Navajo texts, summer literature camps, and the involvement of elders as teachers and counselors. Such practices elevate the moral authority and practical utility of the language. Navajo literacy remains confined primarily to the school but supports a sociocultural environment in which young and old share language experiences. Rough Rock evaluative data demonstrate the academic success of bilingual students with a solid foundation in mother-tongue literacy. It remains to be seen whether program graduates pass Navajo to their children as their mother tongue. (Contains 26 references.) (SV)

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Mother Tongue Literacy and Language Renewal: The Case of Navajo

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Mother Tongue Literacy and Language Renewal: The Case of Navajo[1]

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I. An Unfolding Crisis

Of the 175 surviving indigenous languages in the United States, 155 or nearly 90 percent have no child speakers (Krauss 1996). "Increasingly," one observer notes, "young Native Americans grow up speaking only English, learning at best a few words of their ancestral tongues" (Crawford 1995: 18).

The loss of any language comes at enormous cost to its speakers. But all languages are the precipitates of diverse human experiences, and the loss of even one impoverishes us all.[2] The most serious language declines have occurred among indigenous communities in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia. For these communities, the problem is acute. Precisely *because* they are indigenous, there are no language reinforcements available elsewhere, no other motherland where children can return to hear the heritage language spoken or see it written. For indigenous peoples, when a language is lost, it almost certainly cannot be retrieved as a mother tongue.[3]

In the United States, many indigenous communities are addressing this crisis through

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the World Conference on Literacy in Philadelphia (March 1996).

[2] We begin with the assumption that language--in this case, Navajo--is an intellectual, cultural, scientific and spiritual resource to its speakers and humankind. Crawford (1992; 1995), Fishman (1991), Hale (n.d.), and Ruiz (1988; 1994) all present a compelling rationale for a language-as-resource approach. For further discussion, readers are referred to this literature. Our purposes here are to show how such an approach applies to indigenous U.S. languages, and to illuminate the role of mother tongue literacy in implementing that approach.

[3] There are some notable counter-examples. Fishman (1991:289) cites the "miraculous" case of modern Hebrew, in which the process of RLS, reversing language shift, has been remarkably successful. Hinton (1993; 1995), and Sims (in press), also report on efforts to replenish the pool of heritage language speakers in California using a radical approach to language immersion in which language apprentices work with elderly speakers over a period of months and years. In the California cases, the ancestral language is being learned not as a mother tongue, but as a second language. Perhaps the most successful U.S. example of RLS involving an indigenous language as a mother tongue is in Hawaii, where a small group of families re-established Hawaiian as the sole language of the home, and where some preschools and public schools operate totally in Hawaiian (Kamanâ & Wilson 1996).

experimental language and culture renewal programs organized through or in collaboration with local schools. Though different in their goals and social-linguistic circumstances, most of these programs seek to enhance children's cultural pride and academic achievement while promoting the heritage language and culture. Many programs also seek to develop literacy in the native language.

Can such programs withstand the forces driving the move toward English monolingualism? Fishman (1991) argues that they cannot; school-based efforts, he states, are secondary or tertiary to the key process of intergenerational mother tongue transmission, which must be carried out within the intimacy of the home-family-community domain. "One cannot jump across or dispense with [intergenerational language transmission]," Fishman insists; "nothing can substitute for the rebuilding of society at the level of . . . everyday, informal life" (1991: 95, 112). Thus, mother tongue literacy and in particular, school-based mother tongue literacy, are, in Fishman's framework, "dispensable" aspects of the process--potentially helpful but not essential in ensuring survival of the heritage language.

Others argue that literacy is a necessary if not sufficient factor in maintaining indigenous mother tongues (see, e.g., Bernard 1995). We consider these issues for Navajo, the largest indigenous language group in the U.S. Specifically, we address the functions of mother tongue literacy and its potential for language maintenance, drawing on our experience at Rough Rock, Arizona, the site of the first Indian community-controlled school. Galena Sells Dick has taught at Rough Rock since its inception in 1966. She currently directs the school's two-way Navajo/English bilingual program. Teresa McCarty has worked at and with Rough Rock for 16 years as an anthropologist and curriculum developer. We begin with some background on Navajo.

II. The Status of Navajo Today

The Navajo Nation stretches over much of northern Arizona and New Mexico, and part of southern Utah (see Figure 1). Navajo has the largest land base of any U.S. tribe--about 25,000 square miles or an area the size of the state of West Virginia--and the largest population, about

250,000. Navajo country is defined by its location on the Colorado Plateau, a landscape of striking multihued rock formations, deep canyons and pine-studded mesas. Until recent years, this landscape and the tribe's geographic isolation from urban centers exerted a protective influence on Navajo language and culture. Aside from their interactions in federal Indian boarding schools (discussed below), the Navajo population as a whole did not come into regular contact with English until well into the second half of the twentieth century.

Navajo is an Athabaskan language, a subset of the huge Na-Dené language group with speakers spread across the subarctic from Alaska to eastern Canada, southward to the Northwest Pacific Coast, and into the Plains and the U.S. Southwest. While Navajo claims the largest number of speakers of any indigenous language in the U.S.--about 160,000--the absolute number and relative proportion of Navajo speakers have drastically declined in the past 30 years (Holm & Holm 1995). At the same time, the number of Navajos who are monolingual English speakers has increased, from over 7,800 in 1980, to nearly 19,000 in 1990, or 15 percent of the Navajo census population over age five (Crawford 1995: 21).

This situation varies across the reservation, depending on individual community histories and their contact with English. In Fishman's (1991) eight-stage typology of threatened languages (with stage 8 representing the most disrupted), Navajo can be placed at stages 7 (a vibrant adult-speaking community), 6 (intergenerational transmission), 5 (literacy in the heritage language), 4 (schools under indigenous and external control), 3 and 2 (reservation-based work, media, higher education, and government). But this classification masks the complexity of Navajo language use and change across the reservation.[4] In general, the language is strongest in reservation-interior communities, where some monolingual Navajo households remain. In communities on or near the reservation border, it is typically elderly family members who speak Navajo and know little English, while their children are bilingual and their grandchildren speak English and know little Navajo. Throughout the reservation, English dominates the print environment, though written

[4] We do not consider here language use within families living off the reservation--situations for which we know of little published data, but which add to the complex dynamics of the characterization offered here.

Navajo serves important community-wide functions in some areas (see, e.g., McLaughlin 1992). Other forces reinforce the primacy of oral Navajo: Kin relations are defined in Navajo; Navajo is the language of local and tribal government; a regional radio station carries all-Navajo broadcasts; and it is still inconceivable that an individual could be elected to the tribal presidency or that medicine men could conduct their work without a firm command of the native language (see, e.g., Benally & McCarty 1990).

Nonetheless, recent reservation-wide surveys show a clear trend: "Only about half of the students now entering school are speakers of Navajo," Holm & Holm (1995: 62) report. The ultimate causes of this shift toward English must be understood within the context of U.S. colonialism and native language repression. The proximate causes of Navajo language shift include changing residence patterns and the separation of extended families associated with the transition to a wage economy; improvements in transportation that have facilitated access to and by English speakers; English telecommunications and mass media; and more generally, a gradual increase in the social, political, and economic integration of the Navajo Nation within the larger society.

While all of these factors have had an effect, their impacts might have been less were it not for the overwhelming assimilative force of a single collective experience: English-only schooling. From the 1880s to the 1960s, the U.S. government imposed a fierce English-only policy on Navajo and other indigenous students in an attempt to "blot out . . . . barbarous dialects" (Atkins 1887). Stories abound of young children being kidnapped from their homes and taken by Indian agents in horse and wagon to the boarding schools. There, students faced militaristic discipline, manual labor, instruction in a trade, and abusive treatment for 'reverting' to the mother tongue (Medicine 1982: 399). Dick recalls:

> *"We were punished and abused for speaking our native language . . . . If we were caught speaking Navajo, the dormitory matrons gave us chores like scrubbing and waxing the floors, or they slapped our hands with rulers. Some students had their*

mouths 'washed' with yellow bar soap. Thankfully I never experienced this last punishment" (Dick and McCarty in press).

Experiences such as these left a residue of shame and ambiguity about Navajo, inhibiting many parents from passing it on to their children. In combination with the sociocultural changes noted earlier, the net effect was to redefine language attitudes and thereby alter language choices in the home. One Navajo teacher explains this, citing her own internalized belief that "our language is second best" (Dick & McCarty in press).

Only recently have the federal policies informing such school-based practices been replaced by policies intended to encourage the meaningful incorporation of indigenous languages and cultural knowledge into school curricula. Within the 1960s Civil Rights reforms and a new federal policy of tribal self-determination, Navajo community-controlled schools emerged as a primary demonstration of resistance to forced assimilation. Governed by locally elected, indigenous leaders, community-controlled schools have been at the forefront of American Indian bilingual education and a growing movement to stabilize and revitalize indigenous languages and cultures.

Is this movement having an impact, and is it sufficient? To address these questions, we turn now to a case study of the first Indian community-controlled school: the Rough Rock Community School in northeastern Arizona.

III. Language and Culture Renewal at Rough Rock

The Navajo word for school is *ólta'*, meaning "a learning place associated with the white man's world" (Dick and McCarty in press). The school at Rough Rock is called *Diné Bi'ólta'*; Rough Rock is The People's School. An outgrowth of federal War on Povery programs, the Rough Rock Demonstration School was founded in 1966 through an unprecedented contract with the U.S. government that empowered parents and community leaders to operate their own school (Roessel 1977).[5] When the school began, Navajo had been written for over 100 years, but few

[5] The events leading to the founding of the school are well documented elsewhere (see, e.g., Johnson 1968; Roessel 1977; McCarty 1989). Briefly, a three-year demonstration project began in 1965 at a nearby Bureau of Indian Affairs

teaching materials existed in the language. Rough Rock launched the first publishing center for Navajo curricula and established a Navajo emphasis program that included initial literacy in Navajo, adult education, a medicine man training project, and numerous other community development initiatives. Classroom instruction explicitly emphasized Navajo language and culture.

Since these first experimental programs, however, bilingual/bicultural education at Rough Rock has fluctuated in response to federal funding and language policies. This situation reflects the reservation economy and lack of alternative funding sources, and the historic federal-tribal relationship in which tribal lands were ceded for promised federal education and social support. The reality has been that during some years, no funds were forthcoming for the provision of adequate bilingual services to Rough Rock's Navajo-speaking students.

The recent reinvigoration of Rough Rock's bilingual program can be laid to the school board's long-term commitment to "grow their own" bilingual faculty (cf. Holm & Holm 1990; Watahomigie & McCarty 1994). Even during years when federal bilingual education funds were limited, the school board encouraged and enabled bilingual teacher assistants to work toward their teaching degrees. These efforts produced a cadre of local educators with a vested interest in the community and its children, who are prepared and committed to providing bilingual/bicultural instruction. Dick remembers:

> *"As I worked on my degree and in my own classroom, I began to learn to read and write my language. I was learning along with my students. I had to pick up where I stopped when I entered boarding school, because my languge and culture had been taken away from me. . . . Now that there are more Navajo certified teachers at the school, we are better able to use Navajo as a resource for learning* (Dick & McCarty in press).

(BIA) school. That project proved untenable after the first year due to logistic and bureaucratic problems. To complete the project's remaining two years, federal and tribal representatives identified the new and as yet unstaffed Rough Rock boarding school. After several community meetings at which Rough Rock residents agreed to undertake the demonstration project, community leaders, a tribal trustee board, the BIA, and the Office of Economic Opportunity entered into a contract that inaugurated the Rough Rock Demonstration School in July 1966.

Today, with a staff of 12 elementary bilingual teachers and a new federal bilingual education grant, Rough Rock is implementing a K-6, two-way bilingual program designed to develop children's oral and written Navajo and English proficiency. Although 75% of these students still claim Navajo as a primary language, a clear shift toward English is underway. The bilingual program is therefore concerned with both maintaining children's Navajo abilities and developing their proficiency in English. This is indeed a challenging task.

Past experience at Rough Rock has provided ample evidence that even with the presence of a bilingual program, English is privileged in the classroom in myriad ways. The abundance of English curriculum materials reflects the numerical, economic and political dominance of English and English speakers. To ensure that students receive sufficient high-quality exposure to Navajo, specific classrooms and teachers have been designated solely for Navajo content instruction. Each day students switch classrooms and teachers for extended blocks of time, during which they hear, see, speak, read and write in Navajo. The bilingual staff also has produced several children's texts in Navajo. For example, in Jessie Caboni's *Łįįhsoół Ayázhi Nináyiijááh (Yellowhorse Bringing Lambs Home* (see Figure 2), children learn of the gentle, smart horse whose owner saddled him with gunnysacks, filled the pockets with newborn lambs from the field, and trusted the horse to return safely home with his newborn charges. Macintosh computers and a small printing budget have turned such stories into high quality literature. Texts such as these validate the local culture, open new possibilities for biliteracy development, and allow students to see their teachers as published authors--*in Navajo.* In addition, during summer literature camps and regular classroom activities, elders provide instruction in Navajo on harvesting, traditional storytelling, livestock management, drama and other arts. Elders also serve as school counselors, conducting counseling sessions in Navajo in a traditional dwelling or *hooghan.*

Such activities have enabled the Navajo staff to reclaim Navajo for academic purposes, thereby elevating the moral authority and practical utility of the language. Preliminary program evaluations also demonstrate clear benefits to students, as they show consistent improvements on

local and national measures of achievement, and in their Navajo and English writing (Dick & McCarty in press). The overall impact has been to heighten community consciousness about the value of Navajo language and culture. Unlike the conditions under which Rough Rock began, Navajo language and culture maintenance now is far from assured. Rough Rock parents and elders are keenly aware of this. "If a child learns only the *bilagaana* (non-Indian) way of living," one grandmother recently remarked, "you have lost your child." Parents and grandparents now have tangible demonstrations of the ways in which their own lives can become the basis for school-based language and literacy learning. This has begun to transform the negative attitudes toward literacy forged in the boarding schools, and to promote the understanding that literacy is not something held by a privileged few, or, as the boarding schools taught, simply words on a page. I thought only the Anglos wrote books," an elder said on being presented with Jessie Caboni's book. Texts and school-based practices such as those at Rough Rock have helped foster a growing consciousness that literacy is a process that is continuously renegotiated, as community members--the bearers of Rough Rock's literacy history--interact, joke, tell stories and share life lessons. Galena Dick sums this up:

> *"When we went to school, all we learned was English and Western culture. We were never told the stories that Rough Rock children now are told and write themselves. We're telling those stories now. We see both sides of it--and we're helping children make connections through literacy to their own lives."*

IV. Mother Tongue Literacy and Language Shift

At Rough Rock, literacy in Navajo remains confined primarily to the school. Within this domain, Navajo literacy is used to inform, instruct, record traditional knowledge, transmit non-Navajo knowledge, and mediate children's and adults' interpersonal communications and intrapersonal reflections (cf. McLaughlin 1992). But literacy in Navajo is more than this. To make sense of literacy functions, McLaughlin (1989: 287) argues, "We need to see literacy in

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can be passed on to children. Schools and their participants can support and safeguard the integrity of that sociocultural environment. In this respect, mother tongue literacy, by fostering the sharing of language experiences between young and old, is indeed a powerful tool.

Rough Rock provides one example of how these processes can be activated. Eight years of evaluative data at Rough Rock also tell us that bilingual students who develop a solid foundation of mother tongue literacy have a far better chance of succeeding in school than students in English-only or English-mostly tracks (McCarty 1993). In terms of the bilingual program's larger goals for language and culture renewal, the real test will be whether the graduates of this program, as adults, ensure that their own children grow up having Navajo as their mother tongue.

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Figure 1. Indian Reservations and Communities in the U.S. Southwest

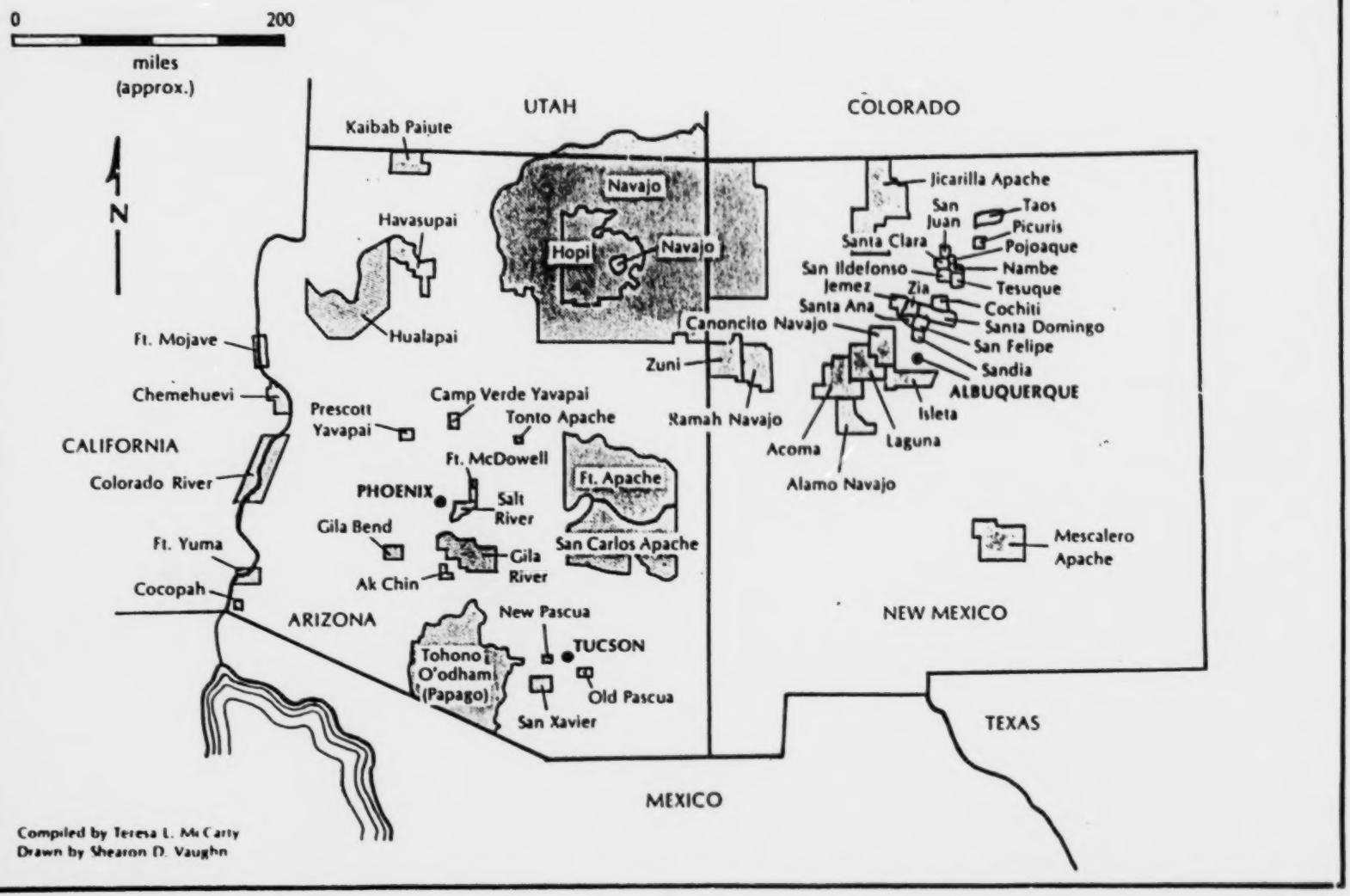

Figure 2. Excerpts from a Staff-Developed Navajo Storybook, *Ł[[ttsooí Ayázhí Nináyiiįááh (Yellowhorse Bringing Lambs Home)* by Jessie Caboni

Ł[[ttsooí Ayázhí Nináyiiįááh

Jessie Caboni Hane' Ávtilaa
Gilberto Jumbo Na'azhch aa
Afton Sells Naaltsoos Afkee' Nuniní

Doo dah na'a**ł**go'da jiníʃgo t'áá éí t'éiyá hwo**ł** naaldloosh ₹eh. T'áá akwíįį dibé bikéé' chojoo**ł**ʃįgo nahayéii ₹eh. Ł[[' bidą́ą́' dóó ₩'oh ayóo yee yaa áhályą́ą́ nít'éé'. Łahda bilasáana ya**ł**né'áah ₹eh. Éí binahjį' t'áá bí hooghanįį' nizhóníʃgo dináhályeedgo yíhoo**ł**ą́ą́'. Dibé taah nánił déé'da, nidáá' dęę'da, bizh'dichi'go t'áá bí hooghanįį' nizhóníʃgo anáhályeed siłį[[.